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DAUGHTER OF MIGRANT WORKERS HOPES TO GIVE SOMETHING BACK

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Juanita Mainster's own life motivates her to rewrite the usual script for children of migrant and seasonal farmworkers. The 42-year-old can easily recall being rounded up by the Border Patrol in fields north of Brownsville, Texas, and deported to Mexico -- even though she was a U.S. citizen.

"My parents were undocumented, so I got rounded up and thrown in the truck and hauled off with them," she said. And she remembers how unscrupulous farmers took advantage of her illiterate parents as they picked cotton in south Texas and strawberries in Tennessee, or hoed sugar beets in Michigan.

"By age 11, I was learning how to negotiate contracts for my father," she said. "I could read. He couldn't. My mother still can't." In 1972, she arrived in Homestead, a plant handler at a nursery. After settling in her new hometown, she attended an event at Harris Field. Before the day was over, she had been accused of stealing money to buy hamburgers for her children. "It wasn't true," she said. "And someone intervened on my behalf. But I've never forgotten that day."

Today, Mainster's life is devoted to breaking the cycle of illiteracy, exploitation and discrimination for migrants. Sometimes it seems as if she's her own one-woman crusade in South Dade. Consider her list of memberships and affiliations:

- She's director of resident services for the Everglades Community Association, which runs migrant housing. * Mainster serves as president of the Mexican-American Arts and Cultural Council. In this role, she promotes Mexican culture throughout South Florida and teaches Mexican youth about their history and culture.
- She's the secretary on the board of MUJER -- Women United in Justice, Education and Reform -- a fledgling South Dade women's group that caters to the needs of Hispanic women.
- She is vice president of the Homestead/Florida City Democratic Club.
- She's program chairwoman for Leadership South Dade.
- She's a member of the Metro-Dade Hispanic Advisory Commission.

Even Mainster admits she has a hard time keeping up. A few years ago, as things got increasingly hectic, she asked herself what she wanted to accomplish. "I realized what I want to give is rooted in my childhood," she said. "I want to give back because I feel every child has the right to an education and every parent has to understand that if the children don't go to school and get an education, they will not do better or advance past the life of a farmworker."

But she said she's realistic about rewriting the history of a people long exploited. "I realized a while ago that I can't save the world," she said. "I have to work one child at a time. If I can get one kid to realize school is important and really focus on continuing their education, then that's a breakthrough."

